

An Australian and the "Empire of the Sun"¹

Brad Manera²

Those that were alive at the time will never forget how they received the news that the Second World War had ended. For Rose Sarah Rasey, an Australian nurse and missionary in China, the allied victory meant the end to years of imprisonment at the hands of Japanese military authorities.

The Japanese Government signed the instrument of surrender on 2 September 1945. Rose Rasey was a prisoner in the camp at Lunghwa near Shanghai at that time. On the day of the surrender she wrote to her friend, and former fellow missionary, Marjorie, recounting how the inmates responded to the momentous news of that day:

"The 'Peace' came so suddenly that we could not realise it at first ... rumours were thick of bombings over Japan, and of fighting still going on. Wednesday 15th we were told, 'The War is over', definitely, and our Camp representative was allowed to go to the city, in a car, unescorted, we knew it was *true*!! Cheers and rejoicing! That evening we had an open air Thanksgiving service, and Flag raising ceremony. ... With hearts overflowing in praise of God, & tears of joy in our eyes we sang "O God our help in ages past"—a united service, many Jews were present, led by Mr W Rowlands, LMS, of Hopei, representing the Nonconformists, and the Dean of Shanghai Cathedral.

"That night the young folk had a concert and dance on the roof of one building".³

But peace did not bring immediate relief and it would be more than three and a half months before Rose was reunited with her family in Brisbane.

Rose Sarah Rasey (1896-1992) was a nurse and for 15 of her 96 years she was a missionary in China. She survived war, illness and imprisonment. The letters Rose Rasey wrote to her family from China⁴ and the armband and identity tag she wore as a prisoner of the Imperial Japanese Army have recently become part of the National Museum of Australia's collection.⁵ They allow us a glimpse of her remarkable life.

Rose was born on 10 June 1896, in Brisbane, second youngest of a family of five girls and two boys. Upon leaving school she initially trained as a milliner then changed to a career in nursing. Rose Rasey studied in Brisbane for three years to qualify as a nurse and, after graduating, worked in hospitals in Sydney, Melbourne, Hobart and across the Tasman in New Zealand. Rose's family were Christians but, to use her own words, "toward the end of my teens I

¹ This is a play on the title of a semi-autobiographical novel, *Empire of the Sun* (Simon & Schuster, New York, 1984) by J G Ballard, about British civilians living in Shanghai interned by the Japanese. Now a popular feature film.

² Department of Australian Society and History National Museum of Australia

³ Letter from R S Rasey to "Darling Marjorie" from the "Civil Assembly Centre, Lunghwa", 2 September 1945.

⁴ In this article I have not altered the English place names that were in use by non Chinese English speakers before the Pinyin Romanisation, as this is the nomenclature that Rose Rasey was familiar with during her time in China.

⁵ Rose Rasey's armband, identity tag and letters have been donated to the National Museum of Australia by her great nephew R G Bain QC.

wandered away from God".⁶ While working in hospitals in the early 1920s Rose met other nurses who were devout Christians. Contact with these people strengthened Rose Rasey's own Christian faith. In 1929 Rose would remember and write of her reintroduction to religion, "Within a few days I had a definite knowledge and assurance of being a child of God through the witness of His Holy Spirit. My whole outlook on life took on a different aspect from that of former days. I wanted to serve God, because I already had eternal life, not because I hoped to gain eternal life through service to him."⁷ This conviction attracted Rose to a missionary calling and would sustain her through the privations she could not have imagined she would face in China in the 1930s and 40s.

In the mid 1920s Rose Rasey did obstetrics training at Melbourne Women's Hospital, and was an active member of the Australian Nurses' Christian Movement. After her training she was asked to go to Queensland as the Organising Secretary of the Movement. Nursing in Queensland for two years drew her to missionary work. She wrote, "gradually the Lord began to burden my heart with the great need of those in foreign lands who had never heard the Gospel. At first I thought it was Egypt, but later on China ... was the place of His appointment for this life of mine."⁸

Rose Sarah Rasey joined the China Inland Mission on 16 July 1929. On Armistice Day of that year the China-bound SS *Tanda* steamed out of Moreton Bay with Miss R S Rasey listed among the passengers.⁹ She was entering the social and political chaos that was China between the world wars—a China that would be her home for the more than a decade and a half.

After the Great War (1914-1918) fighting among bandits, war-lords, regionally based political cliques, rioting students as well as rivalry between the Canton based Nationalist Government and the Communists, competed with flood, earthquake and drought induced famine and disease to create a whirlpool of violence and confusion. In the 1930s, China's domestic nightmare was exacerbated by the external pressures of border clashes with the Soviet Union and invasion by Japan. This followed the first campaigns of a civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists that included their now legendary Long March of 1934 to 1935. Then came World War Two.¹⁰

When Rose Rasey arrived in China in 1929, the China Inland Mission had 1,162 active workers, of which 129 were Australians or New Zealanders.¹¹ They were scattered across China from Yunan to the Manchurian boarder. Since the mid 1860s, missionaries of the China Inland Mission had been learning the language, adopting local dress (when appropriate) and working

⁶ Autobiographical notes by "Miss R S Rasey" in *China's Millions* (China Inland Mission, Sydney) November 1, 1929 page 165

⁷ Ibid.

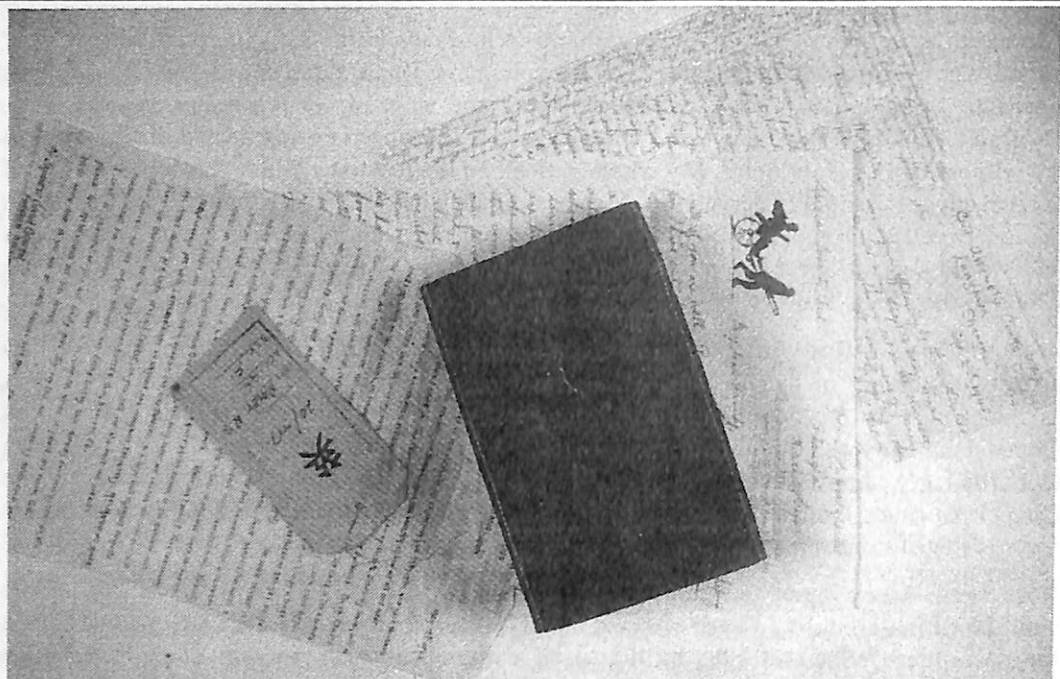
⁸ Ibid.

⁹ *China's Millions* (China Inland Mission, Sydney) November 1, 1929 page 163

¹⁰ For an outline of conflict in China from 1919 to 1945 and its impact on missionary activity see:

- Loane MA DD, M L *The Story of the China Inland Mission in Australia and New Zealand 1890-1964* (Halstead Press, Sydney. 1965)
- Keegan, J (Ed), *The Times Atlas of the Second World War* (Times Books Ltd, 1989) chapters 3 & 4
- Fitzgerald, C P, *The Birth of Communist China* (Pengtiin, Middlesex. 1964), *East Asia's Millions* (Overseas Missionary Fellowship, Epping.) Vol 98 No 2 April/June 1990

¹¹ Loane MA DD, M L, *The Story of the China Inland Mission in Australia and New Zealand 1890-1964* (Halstead Press, Sydney, 1965) page 66



to spread Christianity in China. They suffered illness, physical privations, attacks from—and occasionally death at the hands of—bandits or ill disciplined soldiers and other innumerable hardships in their chosen task, but they persevered.¹² Rose Rasey's training as a nurse equipped her to dispense aid to the body as well as the soul as she worked in troubled provincial north China.

On Christmas Day 1934, Rose returned to Australia accompanying a sick fellow missionary. She took a furlough and studied child welfare during 1935, returning to China on 9 February 1936. For most of the next two years Rose travelled the provinces of Honan, Hopeh and Shensi explaining the Gospel to Chinese peasants, particularly the wives and daughters of farmers and miners.¹³ Her letters home describe with sympathy and detail village life in China under the ever present threat of natural disaster, "Reds" and "lawless men".¹⁴

The Imperial Japanese Army invaded China proper in 1937. The atrocities it committed as part of its reign of terror in the countryside as well as in cities like Nanking have been well documented. The resulting bloodshed meant that trained nurses like Rose Rasey were in great demand but, tragically, short supply. From the life of a travelling missionary she became a nurse, and later matron, of a series of hospitals dangerously close to the face of battle.

Rose Rasey nursed in a number of hospitals in war torn China. She spent much of 1938 serving at the American Baptist Mission Hospital at Chengchow in Honan.¹⁵ A year later she was helping manage the China Inland Mission Hospital at Hwailu in Hopeh.¹⁶ In a letter home Rose

¹² *East Asia's Millions* (Overseas Missionary Fellowship, Epping.) Vol 98 No 2 April/June 1990

¹³ Letter from R S Rasey to "My dear Family" from the China Inland Mission, Tsingsing, Hopeh. 18 November 1936.

¹⁴ Letter from R S Rasey entitled "General News". January 1937

¹⁵ Letters from R S Rasey to "My Dear Family" from the American Baptist Mission Hospital, Chengchow, Honan, dated 3 June 1938 and 17 June 1938.

¹⁶ Letter from R S Rasey to "My dear Friends" from the China Inland Mission, Hwailu, Hopeh. 14 March 1939

describes the conditions in the nearby military hospital in which she and two other missionaries, a doctor and a nurses' aid, were trying to help out and care for over 1,000 wounded soldiers. She wrote:

"Proper equipment in the form of steam sterilizers are lacking but instruments are boiled, or soaked in antiseptic solution, & the Drs go ahead & do whatever is possible. Legs, arms, hands, are amputated, bullets extracted from legs & arms, but those with deep chest or abdominal conditions have to wait till more equipment is procured. ...

"The men lie on straw mats on the floor with a ru-tsi under them, covered with a wadded quilt. Coats etc rolled up serve as a pillow. There are about 30 men in the 'ward' we work in, they lie against the wall ... Small boys are employed to fetch boiled water for drinking, & bowls of food. Alas! Opium is brought to them, too, but who can blame them, altogether, when they are in so much pain!! ... We go out every morning at 10 am. when materials for dressings are given out. Gauze, cotton wool, bandages, with small bottles of Iodine, Mercurochrome, Carbolic Solution, etc. The dressings are not sterilized, but they are clean, so we go ahead. Vaseline & another ointment serve very well as protective agencies against the invasion of flies!! The wounds are truly dreadful, some men have been ten days wounded before we get them; they had some first-aid nearer the fighting line, but many are in a sorrowful condition when they come here."¹⁷

As the war raged all around Rose Rasey she did not consider running before the Japanese invader. In a letter to her family in June 1938 from the American Baptist Mission Hospital, Chengchow, she notes next to her contact details, "Write to this address, if we are 'taken' mail will come via Shanghai—if not we may still be in touch [through] Hankow."¹⁸ Rose was eventually "taken" while working at a hospital in Shunteh, Hopeh province. At her hospital in Shunteh, through 1940 and 1941, Rose Rasey rarely had less than 70 patients, mostly civilians, victims of diseases caused by drought and famine. She was particularly touched by:

"the number of small children in hospital for treatment of a disease prevalent in North China called Kala-Azar.

"The spleen is enlarged and the patients' condition is debilitated by fever, loss of appetite, and complaints such as hard lumps that form in the mouth or cheek, these gradually develop into a hole, unless treatment can be given early enough to check the disease. Their plight appears pitiful indeed."¹⁹

Even when the Japanese occupied Hopeh Rose Rasey continued to work in her hospital. It was not until the declaration of war between the British Empire and Imperial Japan on 8 December 1941, that Rose was interned as an "enemy alien". She was incarcerated in a converted mission compound in Shunteh for the next eight months. Then in August 1942 she and 113 other British, Dutch and US nationals were transferred to Shanghai.²⁰

In Shanghai, Rose and her fellow internees were made to wear red armbands to identify themselves as enemy aliens. She mentions in a letter to her family in March 1943, "sometime

¹⁷ Letter from R S Rasey, 25 October (front page missing).

¹⁸ Letter from R S Rasey to "My Dear Family" from the American Baptist Mission Hospital, Chengchow, Honan, 17 June 1938

¹⁹ Letter from R S Rasey to "My Dear Friend" from Shunteh, Hopeh, 15 June 1940.

²⁰ Letter from R S Rasey to "My Dear Family" from the Civil Assembly Centre, Lunghwa, 26 August 1945

before this year, red arm-bands were issued to us, who were not neutrals. These we, wear on our left arm, displaying our number and nationality.”²¹ Rose’s red armband was printed with a large “B” (to indicate she was a British subject) over a smaller number “3598” in black ink. The armbands were issued by a body called the British Residents Association of China on behalf of the Japanese authorities.²² On Sunday, 28 March 1943, Rose Rasey was given a weeks warning that she would be moved to Lunghwa Civil Assembly Centre, a prison camp about 10 kilometres out of Shanghai. This was to be Rose’s home for the next two and a half years. The night before she was transported to Lunghwa she wrote to her parents:

“To-morrow I am to leave here at noon with one other from here. About 500 are to go into the Centre to-morrow from all over the city. It seems strange to leave our home here, but we feel sure that God has some special reason in permitting these circumstances, & when we all get home to Heaven, in His time, we shall see the eternal result. There is no bitterness or resentment in our hearts. Of course I expect to be kept busy in my usual work, for we expect to have sick people among the eighteen hundred to go into the Centre. There will be about seven hundred children. The Americans will be in another place, about 4 miles from the city, so some of our people are there also. Write through the Red Cross. The branch in the city will have my number & location. With much love to you, each one—Rose.”²³

The next day, 5 April 1943, Rose was issued with a cardboard identity tag then loaded onto a truck with the other internees being sent to Lunghwa. The tag listed her number “20/417”, name, age and sex.²⁴ As she had expected she was assigned work in the camp’s hospital.

Internees at Lunghwa do not appear to have suffered the brutal treatment that was meted out in many Japanese prison camps within the Greater East Asia Co-prosperity Sphere, but the Lunghwa Civil Assembly Centre’s poor food, overcrowding and inadequate sanitation took its toll. Rose Rasey’s letters from captivity are cheerful and avoid detailed descriptions of living conditions within the camp.²⁵ The letters may have been deliberately positive so that they could get past the Japanese censor and assuage the fears for her safety held by her family back in Brisbane. It was not until 2 September 1945, in a letter to Marjorie on the day of the Japanese surrender she mentions that, “From Sept, ’44 to March of this year I was off duty with the same complaint [general debility]. Blood pressure now only 84/58, instead of being around 125, but I have more strength and energy now. We did night duty one week in two months—but I have not done it since my illness. Weight was 142 lbs when I came to Camp, now 126, & it suits me. Most of the folk here have lost weight. The food was, of course, not good. With over 1 700 to cook for it had to be stew, stew, stew—the meat & vegetables could be made to go round when lost in water).”²⁶ At Lunghwa, by mid August 1945, rumours of impending Japanese defeat

²¹ Letter from R S Rasey to “My Dear Family” from the China Inland Mission, Shanghai on hand-drawn “man in rickshaw” letterhead, 28 March 1943.

²² The armband has a black ink stamp inside that reads “BRA” in large block capitals within a circle, around the rim of the circle is the text “BRITISH RESIDENTS ASSOCIATION OF CHINA” in small block capitals.

²³ Letter from R S Rasey to “My Dear Family” from the China Inland Mission, Shanghai on hand-drawn “man in rickshaw” letterhead, 28 March 1943. There are two handwritten copies of this Letter in the collection. RSR may have posted them to Australia using different routes in the event that one did not get through.

²⁴ The cardboard Identity Tag bears the printed Chinese character for “British” above the handwritten number 20/417. 20/417 also appears on her letters dated 18 May 1943 and 2 September 1945. She had written under the number 20/417 on the letter dated 2 September 1945, “my Red Cross number for letters”.

²⁵ Letter from R S Rasey to “My Dear Elsie [Hutchinson]” from the Civil Assembly Centre, Lunghwa, 18 May 1943.

²⁶ Letter from R S Rasey to “Darling Marjorie” from the Civil Assembly Centre, Lunghwa, 2 September 1945.

were rife. When Japan finally surrendered on 2 September the inmates of the camp were relieved and grateful but very aware that they were surrounded by vanquished but still armed Japanese military units. When the Japanese withdrew the camp was left to its own resources. People, who just days earlier had been prisoners themselves, were suddenly faced with managing the camp and feeding their fellow former prisoners. When the gates of the camp opened many simply walked out to seek news of family and friends or eager to find out see for themselves if the war had left them a home or possessions. Most non-Chinese sought repatriation. Rose stayed on at Lunghwa to help the sick while other inmates were getting repatriated. The camp received its supplies by air at that time. Rose wrote:

"USA Army rations, dropped by parachute, which are also very good indeed. The big Flying Fortresses cannot land, airfields are not large enough. They come over from Okinawa & other places with 'War Prisoners Supplies' painted on the wings, our people mark out 'P.W.' on a field to indicate where the supplies are to be dropped. Some break loose from the chute & come hurtling to the earth in a terrifying manner, & the contents are bashed to pieces, but they are few, most land quite well & are pretty to watch coming down on red, blue & green chutes."²⁷

Although on the sick list Rasey's own return to Australia was delayed until late October. On Saturday October 22 Rose Sarah Rasey left China for the last time, she was a patient on the British hospital ship *Empire Clyde*.²⁸ After staging for more than a month in No. 2 PW Reception Camp, Hong Kong, Rose was met by friends in Perth Western Australia, who demanded she take immediate bed rest. In mid December 1945, she wrote to her cousin in New South Wales, "For the last week I have been kept in bed resting ... the friends here noticed that things were a strain, though I did not feel tired; & they asked me to be good & rest, so I did."²⁹

Rose Rasey was reunited with her family in Brisbane over Christmas and New Year 1945/46, nine years and eleven months after her return to China. It took some time for Rose to regain her health after the War. In 1949 China fell to the Communists and Rose Sarah Rasey resigned from the China Inland Mission.³⁰ In her mid 50s Rose returned to nursing as a tutor sister at Royal Brisbane Hospital. She moved to Tasmania, seeking a cooler climate for her health and became a matron at Royal Hobart Hospital, later matron-in-charge of the Royal Nursing Federation Hospital. In her 68th year she returned to Brisbane and took up the post of Nursing Sister at Saint Margaret's Anglican Girl's School. She finally retired in 1981.³¹

On Thursday afternoon, 30 July 1992, Rose Sarah Rasey died.³² In this 50th anniversary year as we remember our fellow Australians who lived through World War Two, Rose Rasey's letters from China and the armband and identity tag she wore as a prisoner of the Japanese that are now part of the collection of the National Museum of Australia record the extraordinary experiences of an ordinary Australian who was there.

²⁷ Letter from R S Rasey to "My Dear Family" from the Civil Assembly Centre, Lunghwa, 15 September 1945.

²⁸ Letter from R S Rasey to "My Dear Family" from the No 2 PoW Reception Camp, 144 Argyle St, Kowloon, Hong Kong, 1945.

²⁹ Letter from R S Rasey to "My Dearest Dorothy [cousin of RSR]" from Perth, Western Australia on Red Cross letterhead, 17 December 1945.

³⁰ This and other dates were supplied or confirmed by Christine at the Overseas Missionary Fellowship Headquarters on telephone (02) 868 4777 Postal address: Overseas Missionary Fellowship, PO Box 849 Epping, NSW 2121.

³¹ "In Memory of Rose Sarah Rasey" in *East Asia's Millions* (Overseas Missionary Fellowship, Epping.) July/September 1992 Supplement.

³² Ibid.